

Meg Greenfield

The Way Things Really Were

This is where I was when I heard: in an elevator in the National Press Building in Washington. Someone asked someone else if Jackie was all right. All right? Why wouldn't she be all right? What? Had something happened? The early, uncertain word from Dallas was passed in the elevator. We all tore back to our offices. Radios went on; phone calls were made to New York head offices and, once you got through, the line left open for the rest of the day; articles were revised or junked, and magazines, like the one I then worked for, hysterically remade on deadline. I date everything back to Nov. 22, 1963, so far as my adult working life is concerned. Everything changed that day, and certain realities began to become clear to me for the first time.

Let's start with journalism. The unseemly truth is that it was exciting. Like the rest of my colleagues I at once went into a kind of detached, almost disembodied, high-octane state. We ran from building to building; we deviled what second- and third-string White House staff we could find on duty. We kept checking in with our bosses, providing new bits of information, suggesting new oddments of stories.

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What I experienced that day, for the first time, was our peculiar special immunity as a trade. We became immune by a crush of duty—get it and get it fast—to any but the most cursory emotions of our own concerning the president's death; all such emotion was automatically displaced. And we became immune in another way, too: we were allowed, even expected, to function outside the restraints of ordinary, decent behavior. We had a job to do. Our license was all but total. And so we moved as an intrusive, indifferent army through the nation's mourning, butting into people with our huge cameras and other equipment; stepping into the middle of sad pictures on our hurried way somewhere else; nagging and hectoring heartbroken officials to give us just one more fact.

In the 25 years since then I feel as though I have tromped clumsily

through a million more people's private sorrows. It is precisely these aspects of press coverage of national tragedies, scandals or even (until we get there) joyous occasions that have come to enrage the public we talk earnestly of serving. We are seen to prosper or at least derive professional advantage from the afflictions of others. And we endlessly jar with our seeming lack of common humanity, being the only people in the hall who are not weeping when others weep, cheering when they cheer or even standing respectfully when they stand.

Do we have any normal emotions left? The president was killed early on a Friday. I didn't finish my manic work until Saturday night. It was only then, on a lonely walk home, that I gradually ceased being a press machine and, somewhat to my astonishment, felt myself start to cry. But here the second reality was borne in on me: I

do not think I was just crying for him, but rather from a combination of fright, disorientation and plain helplessness that had engulfed me that afternoon at the White House, where we had gone for a press viewing of the coffin in the East Room. We had fallen silent for once. The trappings of state were awesome; the coffin, shrouded in a flag, was mounted high so you gazed up at it as you walked past. At each of its corners stood a military sentry at rigid, reverent attention. They were protecting, I couldn't help musing, a dead man's remains. They—that is, we, the great superpower with all our might and wealth and daunting exhibition of power—couldn't protect him against simple mishap alive.

There seemed then, and still does, something unbearably poignant in this revelation of the fragility of the life that exists inside the great imposing structures of our institutions with their pretensions of order, security, justice and logic. The soldiers guard. The statesmen intone. The edifices loom. And bang, you're dead anyhow, and all that seemed charmed, impregnable, larger than life is at once reduced to its pitiful human dimensions.

The death of Kennedy began a quarter century of just such shocks

and confoundings of expectation. We had an idea of political decorum and the inviolability of institutions then. But it turned out that no office was so high, no calling so exalted and no tradition so respected that it was exempt from terrible internal corruption or fatal external assault. Again and again we were to be reminded of this frailty of our leaders, our ideas, our ambitions and even our most basic assumptions about how life is lived. How prophetic it was of this dawning new age that within two days of the assassination, the heavily guarded man accused of killing the president should himself be killed before our very eyes, live on TV.

One final perception took root that day. On Friday evening a bunch of us stood in a press enclosure outside the White House, waiting for Lyndon Johnson's helicopter to land. The presumed killer had been caught and preliminary word was circulating among us that he was a *left-wing* not a *right-wing* nut. Bafflement. Indignation. Denial. It couldn't be. We were primed for trouble from the Dallas reactionaries, not from some sorehead Fidelista progressive (as the rumor on Oswald already ran). I was junior enough at my trade to be amazed at the

way my betters seemed determined to fit the event to their preconceptions anyway. No more: 25 years of observing myself, my colleagues and the public itself fitfully succumb to the temptation persuade me that this is one of the main vices of our political culture.

Among its victims, of course, has been Kennedy himself, who has been re-created in the public shorthand as something he was not. I was not Kennedy's greatest admirer, but I think the real man was a lot more admirable and attractive, failings and all, than the liberal saint of current imagining. Kennedy would have been shocked by much of the political agenda in behalf of which his name is sometimes now invoked by strangers, and I think he would have been repelled by some of the self-righteous, screechy, unforgiving causists who claim him. He was a politician amused by both the game and by other politicians, a man with a Chaucerian appreciation of the human comedy as it played out before him.

I'm not much for anniversary journalism; but this one seems to me worth commemorating, if only to try to recapture the way things really were back then.